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ABSTRACT

The speech by Ernest Boyer, Commissioner of Education identifies his priorities for special education. First, he stresses the commitment of the Office of Education (OE) to the enforcement of Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act through activities to aid states in implementing the law and increased fiscal commitment of the federal government to education of the handicapped. A second priority is the prevention of learning problems through support of prenatal health services and improved obstetrics. Boyer sees special educational services for gifted children as a third priority area. (DE)

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Keynote Address of

-- Ernest L. Boyer

United States Commissioner of Education
at the 56th annual international convention of the
Council for Exceptional Children
Wednesday, May 3, 1978
Kansas City, Missouri

President Peery, Mayor Wheeler, Commissioner Mallory,
Superintendent Wheeler, Superintendent Waier, the Council
for Exceptional Children is an association with deep
conviction and great vision -- and it is a very special
privilege for me to be with you today.

I

- o The members of this association
have understood -- perhaps more
than any other group -- that each
child is a unique person.

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For more than half a century you've insisted that

- o Every boy and girl is someone very special.
- o You've called for schools which permit each child to develop fully.
- o You've refused to put people into boxes.
- o And rejected vigorously the notion that children should be classified on the basis of those who can and cannot learn.

The Council for Exceptional Children has, in short, clearly understood that it is educationally and morally essential that we accept children not on the basis of crude categories but on the basis of their inherent worth.

And nowhere is this humane vision more vividly expressed than in the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1976

--a piece of essential landmark legislation that was shockingly overdue.

- o It's shocking to realize that for years we refused to educate a child because he had a so-called "special" problem.

- o It's shocking that we forced high costs and heartache on the parents of these children.
- o And it's shocking that for years we insisted that children who had the greatest needs -- would be helped the least!

Finally -- at long last -- and through the efforts of this magnificent association -- we've moved to overcome this scandalous neglect which was so harmful to so many of our children.

Finally, because of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1976 our schools must educate all the children

-- not just those who need it least.

And I want you to know that the United States Office of Education is determined to see to it that this law is vigorously enforced.

Thanks to the aggressive leadership of Ed Martin and his first-rate team, public hearings have been held all across the land, thousands of people have been consulted, and a set of first-rate regulations have been written.

- o We've met with special interest groups such as Indians to help them plan for the particular needs of the handicapped.
- o Office of Education teams have traveled to all States and territories to review programs under the new law and give assistance where it is needed.
- o We have set up a number of studies to look at this first year of the law and tell us what we need to know to improve our work next year.
- o Plans have been received, and all but a few states have the money satisfactorily to comply with this important law.

And we are concerned about the money, too. Our Federal budget for the handicapped has gone up dramatically in recent years.

- o Just 5 years ago Federal funding for this program was less than \$150 million.
- o And two years ago before President Carter took office, the budget totaled \$325 million.

- o Today, the appropriation is nearly \$1 billion, a 300 percent increase in just two years -- the largest increase in OE.

o o o

In the end, of course, we're not talking about laws or regulations or even increased budgets. Our goal in all of these is to overcome prejudice and help children in classrooms. Already the walls of isolation are beginning to break down.

- o In Poulsbo, Washington, "Project Success" elementary school students with special learning problems are making dramatic gains -- sometimes scoring 3- and 4-year reading gains in a single year. Children who earlier might have been labelled lazy, or slow, or careless are today demonstrating that they can learn.
- o Stratford, Connecticut, has a special workshop for gifted children in the creative arts.
- o In Montgomery County, Maryland, nearly half of the 159 new teachers being hired by the public schools will be professionals in special education.

o In Clinton, Maryland, 12-year-old Mark Kirchner is enrolled in a special education center. While very young, Mark was diagnosed as "severely retarded." In a day care center, "He wasn't learning, he was stagnating," Mark's mother said. Then came the Education for All Handicapped Children Act -- and Mark's parents used it to get him special services.

--"The changes have just been incredible," says a clinical psychologist who has followed Mark's progress. "He can sit still longer and concentrate on tasks. He's becoming socialized."

--Mark's mother puts it this way: "He needs this training so that someday he can do simple tasks in a job situation. It's wonderful for him, and for us, that we can all be together now. Recently we all went to a track meet to watch our other son. It was the first time Mark

had gone anywhere with us. We were all together, as a family."

--And she adds this: "Parents have got to understand that there's hope."

I'm convinced that because of the Education for all Handicapped Children Act there now is hope, for the nearly 7 million handicapped children in the United States,

- o of whom more than 4 million are not served by any special education program,
- o and of whom 1 million are denied any education at all.

Seeing these children in our public schools is a top priority of this administration. I am committed to give full leadership to this essential program.

II

This morning I wish to underscore a second goal of deep concern to everyone involved in special education.

- o In addition to our work with all children -- especially those with special handicaps.

- o We also must focus on prevention and on research related to the causes of handicaps.

The harsh fact is that many so-called learning problems can be prevented.

- o And we must seek to eliminate current practices in our culture which have tragic consequences for future generations.

For example, the human fetus during pregnancy is vulnerable in ways we are only now beginning to understand -- and there is strong evidence that many learning problems may, in fact, be directly linked to prenatal practices and birth procedures which are medically condoned.

- o The Committee on Drugs of the American Academy of Pediatrics has warned that there is no drug which, when taken by a pregnant woman, has been proved safe for the unborn child.
- o Senator Kennedy -- at a recent hearing on obstetrical practices in the United States -- put it this way: "The mother

who takes several drugs during pregnancy and the physician who prescribes them are generally entering uncharted waters where the degree of risk is almost completely unknown, and the possibility of tragedy always lurks in the background."

The simple fact is that we simply do not know enough about the effects of drugs -- or alcohol, or tobacco -- on the unborn child. And what we do know is ominous, even frightening.

- o And yet in spite of disturbing evidence -- we are careless when we should be cautious and perpetuate practices which may be doing serious damage to unborn children.

The fetus is, of course, no less vulnerable at birth.

- o Important areas of the brain are still undeveloped.
- o The barrier between blood and brain is immature.

- o And the liver and kidney -- the organs most needed for cleaning the blood -- are not yet fully functional.

Yet during labor and birth at many American hospitals expectant mothers confront a veritable barrage of anesthesia, medication, mechanical interventions.

- o Too many hospitals treat childbirth as a "sickness" instead of a natural miracle.
- o There is growing evidence that many of our so-called obstetrical advances may, in fact, have unintended destructive consequences.
- o "We now know that drugs we give women during labor and delivery can cause learning disability," says Dr. Richard Ament, former president of the American Society of Anesthesiologists.

Professor Yvonne Brackbill, professor of Psychology at the University of Florida Medical School, summarized 35 research studies of the effects of obstetric medication on infant behavior and she reports three disturbing findings:

First, The direction of these effects is uniformly, without exception, toward behavioral degradation and interference with normal function.

Second, the use of drugs affects both gross motor abilities and the later abilities to develop language and associated cognitive skills.

Third, the effects are not transient. They persist. The effects are as marked at 4 years as at one year. "It is difficult to avoid concluding," she says, "that the damage is permanent."

It has been estimated that 95% of our hospital births today are medicated. And I find it especially disturbing that -- at the very time we are making social breakthroughs to educate those already handicapped -- the use of medication administered during labor and delivery is not being adequately researched.

Surely all who care about the education of our children have a special obligation -- not only to provide full

opportunity for those with special needs -- but also to push for research to reduce incidents of handicap in the future.

III

As a third priority, I'm convinced the time has come for us to pay more attention to the gifted child. The simple truth is that all too often the children who have a special talent have been smothered by the group, and creativity is discouraged and ignored.

Harold Taylor has suggested that in these days "everything is pushing us into collective states of mind -- when intellectuals huddle together in committees that issue reports in anonymous prose -- and when so many people are willing to strip themselves of their personal qualities in order to become clusters of approved characteristics."

But despite this mood of our time, we must, nevertheless, insist upon the integrity of the single individual and argue heatedly that creative thought and action must be nurtured.

We must also look for more ways to measure talent. Psychologist Pat Cross has pointed out that when you measure only one talent, then half of the children have got to be below average.

- o But talents -- like children -- come in more than one variety.
- o If two talents are measured, then 75% of the children can be above average.
- o The more versatile we become at multiplying the ways our children can succeed, not just linguistically and in computations but materially and spiritually as well, the richer they will be -- and the richer our society will be as well.

The point is simply this:

If we truly care about all students, we must encourage those with special gifts and talents.

I must warn you, however, that the creative soul is not always the most popular soul. Those who travel this path are often labeled brash, irresponsible, troublesome, and heretical.

History is replete with stories of creative pioneers -- science, politics, religion, art -- who saw beyond the

routine of the here and now -- rejected in their own time -- whose brilliance shone through down the corridors of history.

The problem with creativity is this: it is not always easy to distinguish between brashness and brilliance. And very often in the classroom it is easier to ignore talent -- or worse still to label it as troublesome -- than to give it full support.

Because of the risk, we all too often suffocate the creativity both within ourselves and within those around us. In this way, we lose our independence and life takes on a depressing drabness.

In a marvelous little story, Lowell Russell Ditzen says that -- as they walked from their house to the barn -- his granddaughter

- o stopped to pat the dog goodbye,
- o broke away to catch a butterfly,
- o paused under the cottonwood tree to watch the wind shake the leaves,
- o studied a caterpillar who humped his way across our path.

Ditzen continues: When and why do we let living stop being fun? Why do we quit observing and asking questions? How can we permit the self within us that wonders and ponders to be so suffocated?

That great American philosopher, Yogi Berra, once declared, "You can do a good deal of observing by just watching."

The schools can do a lot of teaching by freeing gifted students to follow their own dreams.

IV

This brings me back to the point where I began. The Council for Exceptional Children is so essential because it has reminded educators that we must give high priority to the worth of every individual and that all students have special needs and special gifts.

And this message is urgently needed in our schools today.

- o You see, it is no secret that we live in a world where our inventions and our speeds are driving us farther and farther from each other.

- o Conveniences for the home make families so self-reliant -- they live side by side and never share a cup of sugar; machines at work become so specialized, the pace so fast -- they work side by side and have no common language.

And our schools have become so large that the students can be lost. Indeed, the issue now before us is simply this: Will our inventions and our structures become so important that we depend more upon them than upon each other?

A commentary on our time also appeared in a Saturday Review cartoon:

Large Futuristic Factory

"In case of emergency, break glass."

o o o

Soon after I accepted the assignment I now hold, I was asked to state my priorities for the future.

I responded that my own vision of our schools could be summarized in one simple phrase

--Access to Excellence

- o Access for children who had been historically bypassed and neglected
--and that is best illustrated by those we have labelled handicapped.
- o And excellence for everyone, including the gifted and talented who also have been bypassed and neglected in a quite different way.

The goal which represents the central vision of this great association is reflected in that statement by Vachel Lindsay when he wrote--

Let not young souls be smothered out before
They do quaint deeds and fully flaunt their pride.
It is the world's one crime its babes grow dull,
Its poor are ox-like, limp and leaden-eyed.
Not that they starve, but starve so dreamlessly;
Not that they sow, but that they seldom reap;
Not that they serve, but have no gods to serve;
Not that they die, but that they die like sheep.

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